



If I Called Myself a “Christian:” A Call for a New Christology

By John Bennison, Rel.D

NOTE: An earlier 2-part *Words & Ways* commentary in 2011 approached the question posed in the title, “What *Kind* of Christian?” [Part I](#) described at least two generally different kinds of Christians. There were the heaven-and-hell types that emphasize believing the right things in order to ensure immortality for one’s self; rather than the alternative negative consequence of eternal damnation. The second general understanding of Christian identity was what Marcus Borg (among others) called the “historical-metaphorical” approach; where biblical stories are not only understood within the context of the lives of the people experiencing them in a particular culture and community’s time and place; but is also conveyed with a language in which universal, divine truths are conveyed that run far deeper than mere transitory facts that only skim the surface. This second approach to the Bible (and “Christian” identity subsequently) is what I’ve always referred to it as the *mytho-poetic* power of biblical language that is universal and timeless.

[Part II](#) consequently considered what kind of Jesus had to do with which kind of Christianity? In the six years that have elapsed since writing those prior commentaries, I acknowledge how much further I have progressed. jb

To simply ask someone if they are a “Christian” is an incomplete and inadequate question. Yet such an inquisition has been asked historically for as long as this world-class religion has been around; in order to separate the sheep from the goats, and true believers from heretics.

The only problem is, whatever distinguishes one from the other has shifted with the sands of social, cultural and theological evolution. Consequently, the more appropriate question to ask is what *kind* of Christian might one be?

From the inception of this religious movement -- emerging from its Judeo roots -- there has been the need to interpret and describe *which* “Jesus” presumably got it all started. That’s why the earliest Christian communities each had their own version of who Jesus was, and what kind of follower one would consequently be; based on an interpretation of that particular historical figure as the “Christ.”

But can one claim to be a follower of certain *kind* of Jesus, without being enshrouded with so much of what traditional Christianity has overlain? What would that look like?

Mr. Jesus NLN

Let’s start with a few basics. If Jesus had a last name we don’t know what it was; but it certainly wasn’t “Christ,” and “H.” likely wasn’t his middle initial (i.e. “Jesus H. Christ”). It was instead an honorary title accorded a post-Easter Jesus by multiple early, emerging communities of believers struggling to figure out what to remember and believe about a 1st century Galilean peasant sage now dead and gone. Only subsequently would they be labeled “Christian.”

‘Messiah’ (מָשִׁיחַ, the Jewish term) or ‘Christ’ (the Greek translation, Ἰησοῦς) was, again, an honorary title that meant the “anointed” one; who represented the ushering in of future age and time to replace the less-than-perfect one in which humanity found itself immersed.

Right “Christian” beliefs (orthodoxy) came along to claim Jesus was (as is) the guy. The result has been a grand testament to the human imagination. Systematic theology, as it is sometimes called, is a magnificent human construct with many compartments that attempt to cover all the contingencies when it comes to explaining (or explaining away) all those “if-this, then-that” scenarios that befall humankind; in the face of the self-evident natural order of things, with the meddling hand of some sort of divine intervention.

“Christology” is the fifty-cent word given to the study of the personhood of the *Jesus of history* when combined with the “*Christ*” of faith; the former being as obvious and ordinary as your life or mine, the latter being a kind of theologized schizophrenia. The “dual nature” attributed to a human Jesus as simultaneously being both fully ‘divine’ and fully human makes a split personality out of Jesus. The result is all the *dis-orders* that emerge in the form of all the quarreling church councils and wrangling ecclesiastical/denominational antagonists. “Oneness” in Christ has been a pipe dream that has fallen sort of the one repeatedly envisioned the Jesus character depicted in the gospel accounts.

“One-ness” in Christ

Decades ago, when I was a young youth group leader while working my way through graduate theological studies, I’d strum the guitar while kids sat in a circle, singing,

*We are one in the Spirit we are one in the Lord,
We are one in the Spirit we are one in the Lord,
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored,
And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,
Yes, they’ll know we are “Christians” by our love. (my italics)*

Peace and harmony was not a theological inquiry for these young folks, however. These were young people just beginning the maturing process of figuring out who they were. A better tune to sing might have been “*I Gotta Be Me.*” Much less a quarrel over Christology, it was more a matter of *personal* ontology. Who were they, and what would define them?

This is not a question relegated to only one life stage, of course. In fact, it was probably not dissimilar for the first puzzled and curious followers of a Galilean wisdom sage and mystic who extended such a precarious invitation to leave fishing and catch something that could feed them for more than a day. So instead of wrangling over if and how Jesus could have been “fully human, fully divine,” perhaps it is more than sufficient to look and see what it might find how this charismatic figure simply reflected the fullness of humanity.

Since the “two natures” of Christ has always been, at best, a divine paradox requiring irrational belief over human reason. More and more it seems far more informative – and potentially enlightening -- to redirect and focus one’s consideration to what constituted his full *humanity* instead.

While there are several canonical gospel passages that place on Jesus’ lips a kind of messianic self-identification, I agree with those biblical scholars more learned than I that the historical Jesus never uttered such things.

Seeing Jesus again for the first time – *or at least another way ...*

The fanciful story of Jesus’ “transfiguration” in Matthew’s gospel (Mt. 17) is one of several places in scripture where Jesus’ divinity is meant to be made perfectly clear by the gospel writer; that is, at least in the eyes of his three followers who trekked up the mountainside with him to see Jesus’ face shine like the sun and his dusty robes turn as white as light.

Then a voice booms out from the clouds that was meant to sound just like the same one speaking when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan; since the message was at least the same one that apparently bore repeating, “This is my dearly beloved son, who brings me great joy, listen to him.”

There’s next to nothing I take literally in the Bible, except what Jesus literally means when he tells those who would follow not to *believe* in him, but to *do* as he does: to love one another, feed one another, forgive one another, bind and raise up one another, and value doing all that above all else.

Hence, in the latest English version of the Matthean story (*The New New Testament* translation), the story concludes with Jesus uttering this injunction: “As they were going down the mountainside, Jesus gave them this warning: ‘Do not speak of this vision to anyone until the Child of Humanity has risen from the dead.’”

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Where subsequent believers have focused on what to make out of the part about rising from the dead in some literal sense, the non-literal meaning of the tale might better be appreciated in what is expressed in that title ascribed to the one who whom they now see and understand in a different light. Jesus’ identity as the “Child of Humanity” could be considered a shift in emphasis over any post-Easter Christological ‘resurrection’ of his subsequently professed divinity.

For a post-theist who has outgrown much of the standard dogma and doctrine of what it means to be a “Christian,” I have a different take on what kind of “Christ” (messiah) this weary world could use. In actuality, it may not be all that different from what that first century Galilean peasant sage had in mind. Here’s what occurs to me:

As an infant, almost seven decades ago, I was baptized and given a Christian faith identity when the ‘stigmata’ (the sign of the cross) was indelibly pressed on my forehead with holy in an anointing, of sorts. In the words pronounced at the time, I was “sealed as Christ’s own forever.” Decades later, I would go on to repeat the same initiation ritual in my priestly role, anointing hordes of baptismal candidates.

But after anointing each candidate – and even though it was not in the prescribed and authorized liturgy – I would add my own 5-fold blessing which I learned from an old, beloved colleague:

*I bless your eyes, that you may see the face of Christ in all people.
I bless your ears, that you may always hear the cry of the poor.
I bless your lips, that you may speak nothing but the gospel of Christ.
I bless your hands, that everything you give and receive may be a sacrament.
And, I bless your feet that you may always run to those who need you.*

Only years later -- after having travelled these pathways for many more years-- have I come to place where I recognize a *new Christology*. It is one that, in fact, likely hearkens back to those earliest *pre-Christian* days; where in such a 5-fold blessing the name of Jesus No-Last-Name could simply replace the title “Christ” subsequently accorded him.

And furthermore, in doing so, there would be no diminishment to the blessing given, nor messianic hope of another world one day replacing the weary old one we’ve got.

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